

# FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS

The Homeless and Child Welfare Experiences of New York's Most At-Risk Families



FALL 2009

A REPORT FROM THE INSTITUTE FOR CHILDREN AND POVERTY

Under the Bloomberg Administration, both the family shelter and child welfare systems have witnessed significant policy changes aimed at helping families achieve stability. New York City's Department of Homeless Services (DHS) focused its efforts on homelessness prevention and permanent housing, whereas New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) placed increasing emphasis on keeping families together and finding stable housing for children. Additionally, enhanced cross-agency interaction between DHS and ACS was a key strategy in Uniting for Solutions Beyond Shelter, the city's 2004 action plan to end homelessness. In the last five years, both agencies have implemented policy changes to promote this collaboration and more effectively serve families in both systems.

Despite efforts toward family stability and interagency networking, however, many homeless parents and their children fall through the cracks. Today almost one-third (31%) of families who reside in the New York City shelter system have children with current or past ACS involvement.<sup>1</sup> The continued prevalence of child welfare involvement among children residing in the New York City family shelter system suggests that the joint efforts of DHS and ACS have not adequately addressed issues of stability or safety for far too many children. This situation grows more complex given the current budgetary constraints in New York City and an estimated \$4 billion budget deficit for FY2010.<sup>2</sup> According to Mayor Bloomberg's preliminary FY2010 budget, not including the Department of Education, child protection and homeless services comprise 87% of the projected city layoffs in all city agencies.<sup>3</sup>

Given this bleak fiscal policy environment, it is important to understand the characteristics and experiences of families who receive aid from both of these agencies. Such knowledge may assist the city in streamlining services during a time of decreased funding. This report provides a description of families who currently reside in the New York City family shelter system and contrasts those families with ACS involvement and those without involvement. While the information provided herein is descriptive in nature, it offers

a snapshot of the families most vulnerable to housing instability and family violence and highlights key areas for future study. Additional investigations will help to guide practice and funding priorities to better serve families and, in turn, improve the city's efficiency in providing services.

## ***HOMELESS CHILDREN WITH OPEN CHILD WELFARE CASES ARE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE MOTHERS WHO PARENTED AS TEENS AND HAVE HISTORIES OF HOMELESSNESS***

### **Child Welfare Histories Among Homeless Families**

This investigation explores the demographic characteristics of families headed by single mothers from a sample of family shelters in New York City. Considering children's ACS involvement, this report groups families

in three categories: no ACS involvement, an open ACS case, and a past ACS case that is closed. The characteristics of the mother and her household including family composition of the sheltered household and general contributing factors that led the family to become homeless are explored.

Similar to homeless families throughout the United States, a homeless family in New York City is most often headed by a single woman in her late twenties or early thirties. As seen in Table 1, homeless mothers are on average between 29 and 30 years old; age does not vary depending on ACS involvement experiences. Race is not a significant factor in determining a family's current ACS involvement. Among mothers who either had no ACS history or have current ACS involvement, approximately half (55% and 50%, respectively) are black and over one-third (37%) are Hispanic. However, when looking at those parents with closed ACS cases, racial differences are more evident: 62% of mothers are black and 27% are Hispanic.

Key differences among the three groups of homeless mothers are age at first child's birth and history of homelessness. As evident in Table 1, over half of mothers with ACS involvement, past or current, had their first child as a teenager compared to 44% of those without ACS involvement. Mothers in shelter with children who have ACS involvement are also more likely to have been homeless prior to their current shelter stay. This difference emerges most clearly between the group of mothers with past ACS involvement and those

with no ACS involvement. Specifically, over two-thirds (67%) of mothers with no ACS history have never been homeless before, whereas among mothers with past ACS involvement, half were previously homeless.

Family composition represents an important description of these families as well. As recorded in Table 1, on average most homeless female-headed households in the New York City shelter system are composed of one or two minor children. Homeless families with current child welfare involvement have slightly more children than other families in shelter, although the difference is not statistically significant. Mothers with past ACS involvement, however, are more likely to have an adult child than either of the other two groups. These adult children do not necessarily live with their family in shelter. On the other hand, mothers who are currently involved with ACS have more minor children residing outside of the shelter compared to other mothers. Twenty-six percent of these mothers have children who are not residing in the shelter with her, versus 7% of those with no ACS interaction and 18% of those with past ACS involvement. Taken together, mothers with current ACS involvement have larger families, with more young children living outside of shelter.

There are multiple factors that contribute to a family becoming homeless and entering the shelter system. Families often live “doubled-up” with friends and relatives. Some may be forced to seek shelter after living in overcrowded spaces or under substandard conditions. Regardless of ACS involvement, families in the New York City family shelter system most frequently cite overcrowding, eviction, and domestic violence as the primary reasons for becoming homeless. Roughly 35% of mothers left their last residence due to overcrowding/conflict, 33% due to eviction, and 25% due to domestic violence (see Table 1).<sup>4</sup>

Substandard living conditions and financial difficulties are cited less often as reasons for families becoming homeless. However, significant differences did emerge based on ACS involvement. Families with ACS histories are significantly more likely to cite substandard living conditions, and families with open ACS cases are less likely to cite financial difficulties than are families with past or no ACS involvement (see Table 1).

### Are all Child Welfare Cases the Same?

No two families are the same, nor are all child protection cases comparable. There are four broad categories of ACS involvement and child protective services cases: open investigation, preventive services, court-mandated supervision or

**Table 1**

<b>Characteristics of Homeless Families (by ACS Involvement)</b>			
	No ACS Involvement (n=299)	Current ACS Involvement (n=68)	Past ACS Involvement (n=60)
<b>Mother's characteristics</b>			
Average age	29	30	30
Race			
Black	55%	50%	62%
Hispanic	37%	37%	27%
White	3%	6%	5%
Other	5%	7%	7%
Average age at first birth	21	20	20
Had first child as a teen	44%	50%	55%
First time homeless	67%	59%	50%
<b>Family composition</b>			
Average number of children in shelter	1	2	1
Have children outside shelter	7%	26%	18%
<b>Reasons became homeless</b>			
Overcrowded/conflict	37%	32%	27%
Eviction	33%	37%	32%
Domestic violence	24%	25%	29%
Financial difficulties	10%	7%	10%
Substandard conditions	3%	6%	8%

Source: Institute for Children and Poverty, National Family Homeless Database.

services, and foster care placement. Within each of these case types, the level of direct ACS involvement differs by family. All cases begin, however, with an open investigation of suspected child abuse or neglect based on a report from a family member, friend, neighbor, or from a mandated reporter such as a child's teacher or childcare professional. Reports detail a range of signs of physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, or emotional abuse, such as a child appearing malnourished, lacking needed medical care, or displaying unexplained burns, bruises, or broken bones.

In the last year, roughly 40% of all reports to ACS of suspected abuse or neglect were ultimately substantiated.<sup>5</sup> Of mothers in the New York City shelter system with any ACS involvement (either past or present), 14% have had substantiated cases of abuse or neglect for one or more of their children. Substantiated cases include those investigations resulting in a foster care placement and/or court-ordered supervision. Families frequently experience more than one type of ACS involvement. For example, a mother with two

children may have ACS court-mandated services for one child because of a substantiated finding of abuse or neglect, and have another child placed in a foster care. As illustrated in Table 2, among current ACS-involved mothers, 4% received court-mandated services, and 4% had children placed in foster care, compared with 8% and 5%, respectively, of mothers with past ACS-involvement. Six percent of currently involved mothers have cases with both foster care placement and court-ordered supervision.

Among families who are currently involved in the child welfare system, 40% became involved with ACS before entering shelter for the first time. As illustrated in Table 2, mothers currently involved in ACS were more likely than those with past involvement to cite housing-related issues as the primary reasons for their ACS involvement.<sup>6</sup> In fact, over one-third (34%) of those currently in the ACS system cite homelessness as one of the primary reasons for involvement.

**Table 2**

Type of Investigation and Reason for ACS Involvement		
	Current ACS Involvement	Past ACS Involvement
<b>Type of investigation</b>		
Investigation only	35%	60%
Prevention only	50%	27%
Foster care placement	4%	8%
Court-ordered supervision	4%	5%
Foster care and court-ordered	6%	0%
<b>Reasons for involvement</b>		
Homelessness	34%	23%
Domestic violence	21%	27%
Eviction	15%	3%
Substance use (drugs and/or alcohol)	13%	10%
Overcrowded	6%	13%

Source: Institute for Children and Poverty, National Family Homeless Database.

Further studies of mothers in shelter with ACS involvement and a history of homelessness are needed. Additional inquiries into childhood residential instability and childhood experience of abuse or neglect among the current population of homeless mothers in the family shelter system can get at such central questions as: what are the factors that lead these mothers to repeated homelessness? Such studies will help better explain the cycle of intergenerational residential instability and violence, as well as the mechanisms to prevent it.

Finally, over a quarter (26%) of mothers in shelter with ACS involvement are separated from one or more of their children (see Table 1). Further studies can clarify the causes of family separation among homeless families and the consequences for children. Although the city attempts to keep families together, the question remains whether DHS and ACS can effectively coordinate the resources to help strengthen families and keep them unified under one roof. If not, it may be inevitable that children will become homeless one way or another and become the real victims of extreme poverty.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Children and Poverty, National Family Homeless Database.

<sup>2</sup> The City of New York, Financial Plan Summary (FY2009–2013), Office of Management and Budget (January 30, 2009), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>4</sup> Total exceeds 100%; mothers could select more than one factor that contributed to their current homelessness.

<sup>5</sup> New York City Mayor's Management Report, Administration for Children's Services, FY08.

<sup>6</sup> Total exceeds 100%; mothers could select more than one factor that contributed to their current homelessness, [http://www.nyc.gov/html/ops/html/mmr/mmr\\_sub.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/ops/html/mmr/mmr_sub.shtml)

## Does a Parent's Past Predict a Child's Future?

While it is difficult to disentangle the challenges that lead to homelessness or put children at risk of experiencing abuse or neglect, this report shows that housing-related stressors affect not only residential stability, but also family stability. Homeless mothers with ACS involvement are more likely to have parented as teenagers, have a history of homelessness, and live separated from one or more of their children. Evidence suggests that services preventing future episodes of child abuse or neglect and family homelessness should be targeted to homeless teenage mothers in shelter.

---

The Institute for Children and Poverty (ICP) is an independent non-profit research organization based in New York City. ICP studies the impact of poverty on family and child well-being and generates research that will enhance public policies and programs affecting poor or homeless children and their families. Specifically, ICP examines the condition of extreme poverty in the United States and its effect on educational attainment, housing, employment, child welfare, domestic violence, and family wellness. Please visit our Web site for more information. [www.icpny.org](http://www.icpny.org)

